A STUDY ON SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SUBJECT- VERB CONCORD

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Introduction

English language is playing a significant role in the all over development of the individual and society. Everyone in the world prefers to learn, read and speak English, because it has become the channel of communication in the present scenario. English language occupies an important place in the world today. In the foreign language development and learning, acquiring the language in a perfect way plays a very essential role. It has become increasingly proficient method of conveying information in society.

Definition of Error

A native speaker sometimes makes mistakes while speaking, not because his competence is deficient, but due to extra linguistic features like memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness and psychological conditions, such as strong emotions.

(e.g.) it's a bit-it has not – I mean, I would not

Really care to have one just like that……. (Pit Corder 1973, p.257)

Statement of the problem

The study of students' errors is the part of the systematic study of the students'

language which is essential for pedagogical purposes. In error analysis errors have a positive impact on evaluating the strategies adopted by the students. It is not indicative of their failure in mastering the language but it reflects the drawbacks in the teaching-learning process. It also offers the teachers a feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching materials as well as the teaching techniques. To the researcher, however, it is an evidence of (1) how language is learnt; (2) what strategies or procedure the students are employing in their discovery of the language.

Significance of the Study

The present study attempts to analyze the student's language in order to determine the relevant pattern of remedial teaching. This analysis is different from the previous studies which concentrate mainly on identification of errors, explanation of their sources and suggestions for pedagogy. It is felt that error analysis should have more positive approach and suggest some definite programme for the teacher in the classroom. The analysis of errors of all types is linguistically significant; but for pedagogic purposes one needs to be selective. Hence this investigation concentrates on Subject-Verb Concord of English syntax, which causes the greatest difficulty to the learners.

Objectives

• To identify errors in the area of S-V concord.

• To ascertain the student's mastery in the area- that is, to compare the proportion of errors with correct utterances.

- To classify these errors into broad categories.

- To suggest remedial measures to rectify the errors of the students in S-V concord.

Universe and Sampling Procedure

The universe of the present study is composed of three constituent colleges of Bharathiar University. By adopting judgment sampling, 450 undergraduate students were chosen for data collection. From each college, a group of 150 students were chosen for the present study and were given questionnaires with a view to elicit their spontaneous response to the same. The group was further divided into three clusters comprising of 50 students from I B.A., B.Sc., and B.Com, respectively. Furthermore, each cluster consists of 25 boys and 25 girls. Thus, 450 scripts were collected from the three colleges out of which, 360 were chosen for analysis. The choice was based on one major point: Scripts that were answered completely.

Homogeneity

The background of the students was restricted to rural area, Tamil medium in their school education and arts and science, as homogeneity in terms of geographical location, medium of instruction and stream of education would conclusively yield valid and reliable conclusions.

Limitation of the Study

The study was limited to the undergraduate students of Constituent colleges of Bharathiar University Erode, Valparai and Gudalur.

Methodology

The Nature of the Tests and Procedure

Error analysis is usually based on two types of tests-free composition and tests prepared with specific objectives. The former facilitates freedom of expression; the latter imposes certain restrictions; it forces the student to use certain structures that he might have avoided in the free composition. To arrive at the best results, both types of tests need to be given.

Question I was a free composition. The topics given were mainly descriptive; thematically or structurally they posed no difficulties for learners at this level. The topic was chosen in such a way that it demanded the use of present tense.

Question II revealed to S-V concord. An objective test consisting of 10 sentences was given. The students had to fill in the blanks with the right forms of the verbs. The verbs to be used were given in brackets. The sentence was graded according to the complexity of NP's in the subject position.

A well designed questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisting of ten simple sentences, with the blanks to be filled in with the suitable form of the verb in the simple present tense form, was given. The verb to be used was also given in brackets. (e.g.) Every boy_____(love) cricket.

The students were specifically instructed to use the present tense forms of the verbs, as English verbs require a definite marker to distinguish between singular and plural subjects, in the simple present tense.

In this test, 2 sentences had pronouns as subject, viz., I, And You. 7 sentence had NP's with quantifiers in the determiner as subjects, viz., Every boy; Many girls; None of his classmates; Many of us; Some of my friends, Neither of his sisters; Each one of them. The last sentence had a conjoined NP as the subject, viz., "Ram and his wife".

The free composition exercise was examined with specific reference to S-V concord.

Data Elucidation

Table I -Percentage of Mistakes

S-V Concord	Total number of verbs used	Total number of mistakes	Percentage
Free composition	8271	5532	
Objective test	3600	2836	

The percentage of mistakes in free composition is almost negligible; but in the objective test it is quite high-one third of the total verbs used are wrong. This does not however, indicate that the students have a better control over S-V concord in free composition. They have avoided many structures in free composition; and when they are forced to use the same in the objective test, they commit mistakes.

The above table confirms the need for both free composition and objective test in error analysis.

Table II −mistakes in S-V concord in free composition

Number of mistakes	No. of students who committed mistakes
No mistakes	43
1-2 mistakes	34
3 mistakes	110
4-10 mistakes	173
Total	360

If 1-2 mistakes are regarded as negligible, 77 students out of the 360 seem to know the rules of S-V concord; 283 are still in the process of learning; but the data presented here can be misleading unless it is supplemented by data from the objective test.

Q.II. table III-mistakes in S-V concord in the objective test

Item no.	The subject NP	No. of students who committed mistakes

1	Every boy	1
2	Many girls	24
3	None of his classmates	19
4	I	22
5	you	24
6	Many of us	30
7	Some of my friends	48
8	Neither of his sisters	64
9	Each one of them	64
10	Ram and his wife	66

More than 25% mistakes have been committed in items 6,7,8,9 and 10. Only one student got all the sentences correct in this test.

The Nature of the Mistakes

Free composition

Since S-V concord is determined by the nature of the subject, the mistakes were classified as follows, according to the nature of the subject.

1. NP's with modifiers

a) Relative pronouns as modifiers.

1.   Now, the **problems** which were happened by the mobile phone, **is** decreasing.

2.   **Mobile phone** is most important thing which **help** us.

b) Prepositional complements as modifiers.

1.   The **Songs** of the film **is** nice.

2.   The **level** of the cinema in the industry **rise**.

2. Collective nouns.

1.   More information **are** available.

3. Introductory 'there'.

1.   There **is** no **places and persons** without using mobilephone

2.   In phone there **is** many **options** like email, internet, etc.

3.   There **is** a **jokes**, love, enemy.

4.   Conjoined sentences with identical (deleted) subjects

1.   He **writes** a message and **transform** to anyone person.

2.   Hollywood movie and Tamil movie **is** very useful.

3.   He **spent** his time with his son and **understand** his ability.

4.   I **go** to college teacher and **helps** the students.

6. Simple NP's or pronouns.

1.   He **send** message

2.   Vijay **act** good film

3.   I **wants** to help students.

4.   The mobile phone **improve** the knowledge.

5.   The other person **store** the number

Table - the nature of mistakes in free composition

Nature of mistakes based on the nature of the subjects	No of students who made mistakes
1.NP's with modifiers-relative clauses/preposition-all the complements	51
2.collective nouns	10
3.introductory 'there'	4
4.conjoined sentences with identical subjects (deleted)	11
5.Quantifiers with partitive in the determiner	3
6.simple NP's or pronouns	68
TOTAL	147

The highest number of mistakes-i.e., 68 is in item 6-with simple NP's or pronouns as subjects. The next highest number is 51 in item 1, involving NP's with modifiers as subjects.

These results need to be compared with the results of the objective test, before deciding on the remedial measures in this area.

Objective test

Types of mistakes based on the nature of the subject	Total no. of the verbs used	Total no of mistakes	percentage

1.pronouns (items 4&5 in table III)	720	166	23%
2.Quantifiers in the determiner (items 1, 2,3,6,7,8,9 in table III)	2520	907	36%
3.NP's with conjunctions (item 10 in table III)	360	162	45%
TOTAL	3600	1235	34.3%

The highest percentage of mistakes, i.e. 45 % has occurred in the use of NP's with conjunctions.

(e.g.) ram and his wife <u>works</u> in the same office.

Ram and his wife <u>working</u> in the same office

The next highest percentage of mistakes, i.e., 36% is in the use of quantifiers in the determiner. There are two categories here:

a) Quantifiers with Partitive:

(e.g.) Many of us <u>hates</u> mathematics.

Some of my friends <u>goes</u> to the library every day.

b) Quantifiers without partitive:

(e.g.) Many girls <u>learns</u> to dance.

Every boy <u>love</u> cricket.

The objective test indicates the need for remedial teaching in S-V concord with special reference to subjects with

i) NP's with conjunctions

ii) NP's with quantifiers in the determiner.

Core remedial grammar with reference to S-V concord

1.   The results of the free composition and objective test indicate that S-V concord should be taught with specific reference to subjects which are constituted of:

a)   NP's with conjunctions.

b)   NP's with quantifiers in the determiner.

c)   NP's with relative clauses as modifiers.

d)   NP's with prepositional complements as modifiers.

2.   In free composition, the highest number of mistakes i.e., 68, occurs in the use of subjects with simple NP's or pronouns. A closer scrutiny revealed that out of these 68 mistakes, 53 were made by the very poor students, who had 4-10 mistakes in S-V concord. As the remedial grammar is meant for the average student, it was decided that this area need not be included therein. This decision was taken mainly because the objective test revealed the least number of mistakes, i.e., 46/200 in this area. As 73% of the students are able to give the right answers in the objective test with reference to this area, it is not necessary to teach the basic rules again. The students already know them. Reinforcement may be given through specific exercises to eradicate the small percentage of errors.

Remedial measures for a pedagogical programme

    Mistakes in S-V concord arise mainly due to two reasons:

1)   Inability to identify the subject of the sentence, in order to apply the S-V concord rule

2)   Inability to identify the number of the subject in certain specific cases.

(e.g.) Conjoined NP's, quantifiers in the determiner.

Let us take the areas included in the core grammar, in order:

a)   Conjoined NP's as subjects

The highest percentage 45% of mistakes in objective test arises here.

(e.g.) ram and his wife works in the same office. The students are misled by the number of the NP nearest to the verb, i.e., "his wife" and use the singular form of the verb. Quirk et.al (1976) gives the following rules. When the two NP's are co-ordinate by 'and' there are two possibilities. If the NP is a result of the reduction of two clauses, then the plural form of the verb is used. If no such reduction is possible the singular form of the verb should be used. The rules are different for NP's co-ordinate with "either……..or". With two singular subject phrases the singular form of the verb is used.

(e.g) either the mayor or his deputy is bound to come.

With two plural subject phrases, the verb is plural.

(e.g) either the strikers of the bosses have misunderstood the claim.

Where one phrase is singular and the other plural, the problem is resolved by recourse to the principle of proximity.

(e.g) either your breaks or your eyesight is at fault.

Either your eyesight or your brakes are at fault.

There are of course many other minor exceptions to the above rules but these could be ignored for the moment.

b)   NP's with quantifiers in the determiner.

Errors arise in this area due to the fact that students are not able to determine the number of the quantifiers and hence use the plural and the singular forms of the verb indiscriminately. There are numerous errors but they do not provide any logical explanation of the sources of the errors.

(e.g) Many of us <u>hates</u> mathematics.

Each one of them <u>read</u> English fluently.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, both free composition and objective test are necessary in error analysis. They complement each other.   As seen above, the results of either, taken separately, would lead to wrong conclusions. The nature of the student's interlanguages, with specific reference to S-V concord has been ascertained. Some of the errors are systematic and logical explanation of their sources is possible. Certain others are unsystematic and indicate that the student is still in the process of learning. There are certain other areas where errors are very few. This indicates that the student has mastered these thoroughly. The students' achievement and shortcomings have been highlighted and a true picture of his interlanguages with the reference to S-Vconcord has emerged. Good teaching enables students to learn to write and write to learn.

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